

# USS Liberty incident

The **USS Liberty incident** was an attack on a United States Navy technical research ship, *USS Liberty*, by Israeli Air Force jet fighter aircraft and Israeli Navy motor torpedo boats, on 8 June 1967, during the Six-Day War.<sup>[3]</sup> The combined air and sea attack killed 34 crew members (naval officers, seamen, two Marines, and one civilian), wounded 171 crew members, and severely damaged the ship.<sup>[4]</sup> At the time, the ship was in international waters north of the Sinai Peninsula, about 25.5 nmi (29.3 mi; 47.2 km) northwest from the Egyptian city of Arish.<sup>[1][5]</sup>

Israel apologized for the attack, saying that the *USS Liberty* had been attacked in error after being mistaken for an Egyptian ship.<sup>[6]</sup> Both the Israeli and U.S. governments conducted inquiries and issued reports that concluded the attack was a mistake due to Israeli confusion about the ship's identity,<sup>[2]</sup> though others, including survivors of the attack, have rejected these conclusions and maintain that the attack was deliberate.<sup>[7]</sup>

In May 1968, the Israeli government paid US\$3,323,500 (US\$22.5 million 2015) in compensation to the families of the 34 men killed in the attack. In March 1969, Israel paid a further \$3,566,457 to the men who had been wounded. On 18 December 1980, it agreed to pay \$6 million as settlement for the final U.S. bill of \$17,132,709 for material damage to the *Liberty* herself plus 13 years' interest.<sup>[8]</sup>

## 1 *USS Liberty*

Main article: *USS Liberty* (AGTR-5)

*USS Liberty* was originally the 7,725 long tons (7,849 t) (light) civilian cargo vessel *Simmons Victory*, a mass-produced, standard-design Victory Ship, the follow-on series to the famous Liberty Ships, which supplied the United Kingdom and Allied troops with cargo. It was acquired by the United States Navy, converted to an Auxiliary Technical Research Ship (AGTR),<sup>[9]</sup> and began her first deployment in 1965, to waters off the west coast of Africa. It carried out several more operations during the next two years.

## 2 Attack on the *Liberty*

### 2.1 Events leading to the attack

During the Six-Day War between Israel and several Arab nations, the United States of America maintained a neutral country status.<sup>[10]</sup> Several days before the war began, the *USS Liberty* was ordered to proceed to the eastern Mediterranean area to perform a signals intelligence collection mission in international waters near the north coast of Sinai, Egypt.<sup>[11]</sup> After the war erupted, due to concerns about her safety as she approached her patrol area, several messages were sent to *Liberty* to increase her allowable closest point of approach (CPA) to Egypt's and Israel's coasts from 12.5 and 6.5 nmi (14.4 and 7.5 mi; 23.2 and 12.0 km), respectively, to 20 and 15 nmi (23 and 17 mi; 37 and 28 km), and then later to 100 nmi (120 mi; 190 km) for both countries.<sup>[12]</sup> Unfortunately, due to ineffective message handling and routing, the CPA change messages were not received until after the attack.<sup>[12]</sup>

According to Israeli sources, at the start of the war on 5 June, General Yitzhak Rabin (then IDF Chief of Staff) informed Commander Ernest Carl Castle, the American Naval Attaché in Tel Aviv, that Israel would defend its coast with every means at its disposal, including sinking unidentified ships. Also, he asked the U.S. to keep its ships away from Israel's shore or at least inform Israel of their exact position.<sup>[13][14]</sup>

American sources said that no inquiry about ships in the area was made until after the *Liberty* attack ended. In a message sent from U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk to U.S. Ambassador Walworth Barbour, in Tel Aviv, Israel, Rusk asked for "urgent confirmation" of Israel's statement. Barbour responded: "No request for info on U.S. ships operating off Sinai was made until after *Liberty* incident." Further, Barbour stated: "Had Israelis made such an inquiry it would have been forwarded immediately to the chief of naval operations and other high naval commands and repeated to dept [Department of State]."<sup>[15]</sup>

With the outbreak of war, Captain William L. McGonagle of the *Liberty* immediately asked Vice Admiral William I. Martin at the United States Sixth Fleet headquarters to send a destroyer to accompany the *Liberty* and serve as its armed escort and as an auxiliary communications center. The following day, 6 June, Admiral Martin replied: "*Liberty* is a clearly marked United States ship in international waters, not a participant in the conflict and not a reasonable subject for attack by any nation. Request denied."<sup>[16]</sup> He promised, however, that in the unlikely event of an inadvertent attack, jet fighters from the Sixth Fleet would be overhead in ten minutes.

Meanwhile, on 6 June, at the United Nations, in response to **United Arab Republic** complaints that the United States was supporting Israel in the conflict, U.S. Ambassador **Arthur Goldberg** said to the **Security Council** that aircraft of the Sixth Fleet were several hundred miles from the conflict,<sup>[12]</sup> indicating that elements of the Sixth Fleet itself were far from the conflict. When the statement was made this was the case, since *Liberty*, now assigned to the Sixth Fleet, was in the central Mediterranean Sea, passing between Libya and Crete,<sup>[17]</sup> but she would ultimately steam to about 13 nmi (15 mi; 24 km) north of the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>[18]</sup>

On the night of 7 June Washington time, early morning on 8 June, 01:10Z or 3:10 am local time, the Pentagon issued an order to Sixth Fleet headquarters to tell the *Liberty* to come no closer than 100 nmi (120 mi; 190 km) to Israel, Syria, or the Sinai coast (Oren, p. 263).<sup>[19]:5, 58 (Exhibit N)</sup>

According to the Naval Court of Inquiry<sup>[20]:23 ff, 111 ff</sup> and National Security Agency official history,<sup>[21]</sup> the order to withdraw was not sent on the radio frequency that USS *Liberty* monitored for her orders until 15:25 Zulu, several hours after the attack, due to a long series of administrative and message routing problems. The Navy said a large volume of unrelated high-precedence traffic, including intelligence intercepts related to the conflict, were being handled at the time; and that this combined with a shortage of qualified **Radiomen** contributed to delayed sending of the withdrawal message.<sup>[20]:111 ff</sup>

## 2.2 Visual contact

Official testimony combined with *Liberty*'s deck log say that throughout the morning of the attack, 8 June, the ship was overflown, at various times and locations, by **Israeli Air Force** (IAF) aircraft.<sup>[18]</sup> The primary aircraft type was the **Nord Noratlas**, in addition to two unidentified delta-wing jets at about 9:00 am Sinai time (GMT+2).<sup>[18]</sup> *Liberty* crewmembers say that one of the Noratlas aircraft flew so close to *Liberty* that noise from its propellers rattled the ship's deck plating, and that the pilots and crewmembers waved to each other.<sup>[22]</sup> It was later reported, based on information from Israel Defense Forces sources, that the over-flights were coincidental, and that the aircraft were hunting for Egyptian submarines previously spotted near the coast.<sup>[23]</sup>

At about 5:45 am Sinai time, a ship-sighting report was initially received at Israeli Central Coastal Command (CCC) about *Liberty*, identified by an aerial naval observer as "apparently a **destroyer**, sailing 70 miles [110 km] west of Gaza."<sup>[24]</sup> The vessel's location was marked on a CCC Control Table, using a red marker, indicating an unidentified vessel.<sup>[25]</sup> At about 6:00 am, the aerial naval observer reported that the ship appeared like a U.S. Navy supply ship; the red marker was replaced with a green marker to indicate a neutral vessel, at about 9:00 am.<sup>[25]</sup> At that same time, an Israeli jet fighter pilot re-

ported that a ship 20 miles (32 km) north of Arish had fired at his aircraft after he tried to identify the vessel.<sup>[25]</sup> Israeli naval command dispatched two destroyers to investigate, but they were returned to their previous positions at 9:40 am after doubts emerged during the pilot's debriefing.<sup>[25]</sup> After the naval observer's Noratlas landed and he was debriefed, the ship he saw was further identified as the USS *Liberty*, based on its "GTR-5" hull markings.<sup>[26]</sup> USS *Liberty*'s marker was removed from CCC's Control Table at 11:00 am, due to its positional information being considered stale.<sup>[27]</sup>

At 11:24 am, Israeli Chief of Naval Operations received a report that Arish was being shelled from the sea.<sup>[28]</sup> An inquiry into the source of the report was ordered to determine its validity.<sup>[28]</sup> The report came from an Air Support Officer in Arish.<sup>[29]</sup> Additionally, at 11:27 am Israeli Supreme Command Head of Operations received a report stating that a ship had been shelling Arish, but the shells had fallen short.<sup>[29]</sup> (Investigative journalist **James Bamford** points out that *Liberty* had only four .50 caliber machine guns mounted on her decks and, thus, could not have shelled the coast.<sup>[30]</sup>) The Head of Operations ordered that the report be verified, and determine whether or not Israeli Navy vessels were off the coast of Arish.<sup>[29]</sup> At 11:45 am, another report arrived at Supreme Command saying two ships were approaching the Arish coast.<sup>[29]</sup>

The shelling and ships reports were passed from Supreme Command to Fleet Operations Control Center.<sup>[29]</sup> The Chief of Naval Operations took them seriously, and at 12:05 pm torpedo boat Division 914 was ordered to patrol in the direction of Arish.<sup>[29]</sup>

Division 914, codenamed "**Pagoda**", was under the command of Commander Moshe Oren.<sup>[29]</sup> It consisted of three torpedo boats numbered: T-203, T-204 and T-206.<sup>[29]</sup> At 12:15 pm, Division 914 received orders to patrol a position 20 miles (32 km) north of Arish.<sup>[29]</sup> As Commander Oren headed toward Arish, he was informed by Naval Operations of the reported shelling of Arish and told that IAF aircraft would be dispatched to the area after the target had been detected.<sup>[29]</sup>

Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin was concerned that the supposed Egyptian shelling was the prelude to an amphibious landing that could outflank Israeli forces. Rabin reiterated the standing order to sink any unidentified ships in the area, but advised caution, as Soviet vessels were reportedly operating nearby.<sup>[23]</sup>

At 1:41 pm, the torpedo boats detected an unknown vessel 20 miles northwest of Arish and 14 miles (23 km) off the coast of **Bardawil**.<sup>[1][31]</sup> The ship's speed was estimated on their radars.<sup>[31]</sup> The Combat Information Center officer on T-204, Ensign Aharon Yifrah, reported to the boat's captain, Commander Moshe Oren, that the target had been detected at a range of 22 miles (35 km), that her speed had been tracked for a few minutes, after which he had determined that the target was moving westward at

a speed of 30 knots (56 km/h; 35 mph). These data were forwarded to the Fleet Operations Control Center.<sup>[31]</sup>

The speed of the target was significant because it indicated that the target was a combat vessel.<sup>[31]</sup> Moreover, Israeli forces had standing orders to fire on any unknown vessels sailing in the area at over 20 knots (37 km/h; 23 mph), a speed which, at the time, could only be attained by warships. The Chief of Naval Operations asked the torpedo boats to double-check their calculations. Yifrah twice recalculated and confirmed his assessment.<sup>[23][31]</sup> A few minutes later, Commander Oren reported that the target, now 17 miles (27 km) from his position, was moving at a speed of 28 knots (52 km/h; 32 mph) on a different heading.<sup>[32]</sup> Bamford, however, points out that the *Liberty's* top speed was far below 28 knots. His sources say that at the time of the attack the *Liberty* was following its signal-intercept mission course along the northern Sinai coast, at about 5 knots (9.3 km/h; 5.8 mph) speed.<sup>[30]</sup>

The data on the ship's speed, together with its direction, indicated that it was an Egyptian destroyer fleeing toward port after shelling Arish. The torpedo boats gave chase, but did not expect to overtake their target before it reached Egypt. Commander Oren requested that the Israeli Air Force dispatch aircraft to intercept.<sup>[23][31]</sup> At 1:48 pm, the Chief of Naval Operations requested dispatch of fighter aircraft to the ship's location.<sup>[33]</sup>



Hunt-class destroyer HMS Blean. The Egyptian Navy had Hunt-class destroyers in 1967

The IAF dispatched two Mirage III fighter jets that arrived at *Liberty* at about 2:00 pm.<sup>[34]</sup> The formation leader, Captain Iftach Spector, attempted to identify the ship.<sup>[34]</sup> He communicated via radio to one of the torpedo boats his observation that the ship appeared like a military ship with one smokestack and one mast.<sup>[35]</sup> Also, he communicated, in effect, that the ship appeared to him like a destroyer or another type of small ship.<sup>[35]</sup> In a post-attack statement, the pilots said they saw no distinguishable markings or flag on the ship.<sup>[35]</sup>

At this point, a recorded exchange took place between a command headquarters weapons systems officer, one

of the air controllers, and the chief air controller questioning a possible American presence. Immediately after the exchange, at 1:57 pm, the chief air controller, Lieutenant-Colonel Shmuel Kislev, cleared the Mirages to attack.<sup>[23][36]</sup>

## 2.3 Air and sea attacks

After being cleared to attack, the Mirages dived on the ship and attacked with 30-mm cannons and rockets.<sup>[37]</sup> The attack came a few minutes after the crew completed a chemical attack drill, with Captain McGonagle on the command bridge.<sup>[38]</sup> The crew was in “stand-down mode”, with their helmets and life jackets removed,<sup>[23]</sup> except battle readiness “modified condition three” was set which meant that the ship's four .50 caliber machine guns were manned and ammunition ready for loading and firing.<sup>[39][40]</sup> Eight crewmen were either killed immediately or died later, and 75 were wounded.<sup>[41]</sup> Among the wounded was McGonagle, who was hit in the right thigh and arm.<sup>[42]</sup> During the attack, antennas were severed, gas drums caught fire, and the ship's flag was knocked down. McGonagle sent an urgent request for help to the Sixth Fleet, “Under attack by unidentified jet aircraft, require immediate assistance.”

The Mirages left after expending their ammunition, and were replaced by two Dassault Mysteres armed with napalm bombs. The Mysteres released their payloads over the ship and strafed it with their cannons. Much of the ship's superstructure caught fire.<sup>[23][43]</sup> The Mysteres were readying to attack again when the Israeli Navy, alerted by the absence of return fire, warned Kislev that the target could be Israeli. Kislev told the pilots not to attack if there was any doubt about identification, and the Israeli Navy quickly contacted all of its vessels in the area. The Israeli Navy found that none of its vessels were under fire, and the aircraft were cleared to attack. However, Kislev was still disturbed by a lack of return fire, and requested one last attempt to identify the ship. Captain Yossi Zuk, leader of the Mystere formation, made an attempt at identification while strafing the ship. He reported seeing no flag, but saw the ship's GTR-5 marking. Kislev immediately ordered the attack stopped. Kislev guessed that the ship was American.<sup>[23]</sup>

The fact that the ship had Latin alphabet markings led Chief of Staff Rabin to fear that the ship was Soviet. Though Egyptian warships were known to disguise their identities with Western markings, they usually displayed Arabic letters and numbers only. Rabin ordered the torpedo boats to remain at a safe distance from the ship, and sent in two Hornet (Aérospatiale Super Frelon) helicopters to search for survivors. These radio communications were recorded by Israel. The order also was recorded in the torpedo boat's log, although Commander Oren alleged not to have received it. The order to cease fire was given at 2:20 pm, twenty-four minutes before the torpedo boats arrived at the *Liberty's* position.<sup>[44]</sup> At 2:35



pm, *Liberty* was hit by a torpedo launched from one of the torpedo boats.<sup>[45]</sup>

During the interval, crewmen aboard the *Liberty* hoisted a large American flag to be clearly identified. During the early part of the air attack and before the torpedo boats were visually sighted, *Liberty* sent a distress message that was received by Sixth Fleet aircraft carrier *USS Saratoga*.<sup>[46]</sup> Aircraft carrier *USS America* dispatched eight aircraft. The carrier had been in the middle of strategic exercises. Vice-Admiral William I. Martin recalled the aircraft minutes later.<sup>[23]</sup>



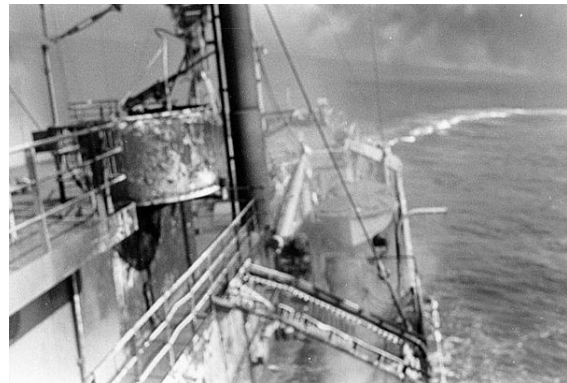
*Israeli Motor Torpedo Boats in formation, circa 1967*

McGonagle testified at the naval court of inquiry that during “the latter moments of the air attack, it was noted that three high speed boats were approaching the ship from the northeast on a relative bearing of approximately 135 [degrees] at a distance of about 15 [nautical] miles. The ship at the time was still on [westward] course 283 [degrees] true, speed unknown, but believed to be in excess of five knots.”<sup>[20]:38</sup> McGonagle testified that he “believed that the time of initial sighting of the torpedo boats ... was about 14:20 [2:20 pm]”, and that the “boats appeared to be in a wedge type formation with the center boat the lead point of the wedge. Estimated speed of the boats was about 27 to 30 knots [50 to 56 km/h],” and that it “appeared that they were approaching the ship in a torpedo launch attitude.”<sup>[20]:38</sup>

When the torpedo boats arrived, Commander Oren could see that the ship could not be the destroyer that had supposedly shelled Arish or any ship capable of 30 knots (56 km/h) speed. Oren believed it was a slower-moving vessel that had either serviced the destroyer or evacuated enemy soldiers from the beach. He ordered the squadron not to attack pending better identification “although this was difficult due to the billowing clouds of smoke that enveloped the vessel; only her bow, part of her bridge and the tip of her mast could be discerned.” At 6,000 meters (20,000 ft), T-204 paused and signalled “AA” – “identify yourself.” Due to damaged equipment, McGonagle could only reply with “AA” using a handheld Aldis lamp. Oren recalled receiving a similar response from the *Ibrahim el Awal*, an Egyptian destroyer captured by Israel during the *Suez Crisis*, and was convinced that he was facing an enemy ship.

He consulted an Israeli identification guide to Arab fleets and concluded the ship was the Egyptian supply ship *El*

*Quseir*, based on observing its deckline, midship bridge and smokestack. The captain of boat T203 reached the same conclusion independently. The boats organized into battle formation, but did not attack.<sup>[44][47]</sup>



*Liberty turns to evade Israeli torpedo boats*

As the torpedo boats rapidly approached, Captain McGonagle ordered a sailor to proceed to machine gun Mount 51 and open fire.<sup>[20]:38</sup> However, he noticed that the boats appeared to be flying an Israeli flag, and “realized that there was a possibility of the aircraft having been Israeli and the attack had been conducted in error.”<sup>[20]:39</sup> Captain McGonagle ordered the man at gun mount 51 to hold fire, but a short burst was fired at the torpedo boats before the man was able to understand the order.<sup>[20]:39</sup> McGonagle observed that machine gun Mount 53 began firing at the center torpedo boat at about the same time gun mount 51 fired, and that its fire was “extremely effective and blanketed the area and the center torpedo boat.”<sup>[20]:39</sup> Machine gun mount 53 was located on the starboard amidships side, behind the pilot house.<sup>[20]:16</sup> McGonagle could not see or “get to mount 53 from the starboard wing of the bridge.”<sup>[20]:39</sup> So, he “sent Mr. Lucas around the port side of the bridge, around to the skylights, to see if he could tell [Seaman] Quintero, whom [he] believed to be the gunner on Machine gun 53, to hold fire.”<sup>[20]:39</sup>

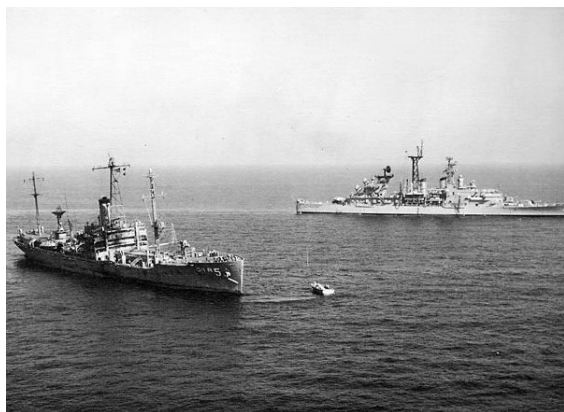
Ensign Lucas “reported back in a few minutes in effect that he saw no one at mount 53.”<sup>[20]:39</sup> Lucas, who had left the command bridge during the air attack and returned to assist Captain McGonagle immediately before a torpedo hit the ship,<sup>[20]:14</sup> believed that the gunfire sound was likely from ammunition cooking off, due to a nearby fire.<sup>[20]:16</sup> Prior to this time, after a torpedo hit the ship, Lucas had granted a request from Quintero to fire at the torpedo boats before heat from a nearby fire chased him from gun mount 53.<sup>[20]:26,27</sup> (McGonagle later testified, at the Court of Inquiry, that this was likely the “extremely effective” firing event he had observed.<sup>[20]:49</sup>)

After coming under fire, Commander Oren repeatedly requested permission from naval headquarters to return fire, and chief naval controller Izzy Rahav finally approved. Shelling by the torpedo boats killed *Liberty*’s helmsman.<sup>[45]</sup> The torpedo boats then launched five tor-

pedoes at the *Liberty*.<sup>[48]</sup> At 1235Z (2:35 local time)<sup>[45]</sup> a torpedo hit *Liberty* on the **starboard** side forward of the superstructure, creating a 40 ft (12 m) wide hole in what had been a former cargo hold converted to the ship's research spaces and killing 25 servicemen, almost all of them from the intelligence section, and wounding dozens.<sup>[23][49]</sup> It has been said the torpedo hit a major hull frame that absorbed much of the energy; crew members reported that if the torpedo had missed the frame the *Liberty* would have split in two. Russian linguist and **U.S. Marine Corps Staff Sergeant** Bryce Lockwood later commented: "I would never deny that it was God that kept the *Liberty* afloat!".<sup>[7]</sup> The other four torpedoes missed the ship.

The torpedo boats then closed in and **strafed** the ship's hull with their cannons and machine guns. According to some crewmen, the torpedo boats fired at damage control parties and sailors preparing life rafts for launch. (See **disputed details below**.) A life raft which floated from the ship was picked up by T-203 and found to bear US Navy markings. T-204 then circled the *Liberty*, and Oren spotted the designation GTR-5, but saw no flag. It took until 3:30 pm to establish the ship's identity. Shortly before the *Liberty*'s identity was confirmed, the *Saratoga* launched eight aircraft armed with conventional weapons towards the *Liberty*. After the ship's identity was confirmed, the General Staff was notified and an apology was sent to naval attaché Castle. The aircraft approaching the *Liberty* were recalled to the *Saratoga*.<sup>[23]</sup>

## 2.4 Aftermath of the attack



The 6th Fleet flagship, *USS Little Rock* standing by the *Liberty*

According to transcripts of intercepted radio communications, published by the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA), at about 2:30 pm, near the beginning of the torpedo boat attack, two IAF helicopters were dispatched to *Liberty*'s location. The helicopters arrived at about 3:10 pm, about 35 minutes after a torpedo hit the ship. After arriving, one of the helicopter pilots was asked, by his ground-based controller, to verify that the ship was flying an American flag. The helicopters conducted a brief

search for crew members of the ship who may have fallen overboard during the air attack. No one was found. The helicopters left the ship at about 3:20 pm.

At about 4 pm, two hours after the attack began, Israel informed the U.S. embassy in **Tel Aviv** that its military forces had mistakenly attacked a U.S. Navy ship. When the ship was "confirmed to be American" the torpedo boats returned at about 4:40 pm to offer help;<sup>[50]</sup> it was refused by the *Liberty*. Later, Israel provided a helicopter to fly U.S. naval attaché Commander Castle to the ship.<sup>[51]</sup> (pp. 32,34)

In Washington, President **Lyndon B. Johnson** had received word from the **Joint Chiefs of Staff** that the *Liberty* had been torpedoed by an unknown vessel at 9:50 am eastern time. Johnson assumed that the Soviets were involved, and hotlined Moscow with news of the attack and the dispatch of jets from the *Saratoga*. He chose not to make any public statements and delegated this task to **Phil G. Goulding**, who was an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs at a time.<sup>[52]</sup>

Soon afterward, the Israelis said that they had mistakenly attacked the ship. The Johnson administration conveyed "strong dismay" to Israeli ambassador **Avraham Harman**. Meanwhile, apologies were soon sent by Israeli Prime Minister **Levi Eshkol**, Foreign Minister **Abba Eban**, and **chargé d'affaires** Efraim Evron. Within 48 hours, Israel offered to compensate the victims and their families.<sup>[44]</sup>

Though the *Liberty* was severely damaged, with a 39 ft wide by 24 ft high (12 m x 7.3 m) hole and a twisted keel, her crew kept her afloat, and she was able to leave the area under her own power. The *Liberty* was later met by the destroyers **USS Davis** and **USS Massey**, and the cruiser **USS Little Rock**. Medical personnel were transferred to the *Liberty*, and it was escorted to **Malta**, where it was given interim repairs. After these were completed in July 1967, *Liberty* returned to the U.S. She was decommissioned in June 1968 and struck from the **Naval Vessel Register**. *Liberty* was transferred to **United States Maritime Administration (MARAD)** in December 1970 and sold for scrap in 1973.

From the start, the response to Israeli statements of mistaken identity ranged between frank disbelief and unquestioning acceptance within the administration in Washington. A communication to the Israeli Ambassador on 10 June, by Secretary Rusk stated, among other things: "At the time of the attack, the *USS Liberty* was flying the American flag and its identification was clearly indicated in large white letters and numerals on its hull. ... Experience demonstrates that both the flag and the identification number of the vessel were readily visible from the air.... Accordingly, there is every reason to believe that the *USS Liberty* was identified, or at least her nationality determined, by Israeli aircraft approximately one hour before the attack. ... The subsequent attack by the torpedo boats, substantially after the vessel was or should have been identified by Israeli military forces,

manifests the same reckless disregard for human life.”<sup>[53]</sup>



*National Cryptologic Memorial. Many names are of those killed on 8 June 1967*

George Lenczowski notes: “It was significant that, in contrast to his secretary of state, President Johnson fully accepted the Israeli version of the tragic incident.” He notes that Johnson himself only included one small paragraph about the *Liberty* in his autobiography,<sup>[54]</sup> in which he accepted the Israeli explanation of “error”, but also minimized the whole affair and distorted the actual number of dead and wounded, by lowering them from 34 to 10 and 171 to 100, respectively. Lenczowski further states: “It seems Johnson was more interested in avoiding a possible confrontation with the Soviet Union, ...than in restraining Israel.”<sup>[55]</sup>

McGonagle received the Medal of Honor, the highest U.S. medal, for his actions.<sup>[56][57]</sup> The Medal of Honor is generally presented by the President of the United States in the White House,<sup>[57][58]</sup> but this time it was awarded at the Washington Navy Yard by the Secretary of the Navy in an unpublicized ceremony, breaking with established tradition.<sup>[57]</sup>

Other *Liberty* sailors received decorations for their actions during and after the attack, but most of the award citations omitted mention of Israel as the perpetrator. In 2009, however, a Silver Star awarded to crewmember Terry Halbardier, who braved machine-gun and cannon fire to repair a damaged antenna that restored the ship’s communications, in the award citation named Israel as the attacker.<sup>[59]</sup>

### 3 Investigations of the attack

#### 3.1 U.S. government investigations

American inquiries, memoranda, records of testimony, and various reports involving or mentioning the *Liberty* attack include, but are not limited to, the following:

- U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry of June 1967
- Joint Chief of Staff’s Report of June 1967.
- CIA Intelligence Memorandums of June 1967



*Torpedo damage to Liberty’s research compartment (Starboard side)*

- Clark Clifford Report of July 1967
- Senate Foreign Relations Committee Testimony during hearings of the 1967 Foreign Aid Authorization bill, July 1967
- House Armed Services Committee Investigation of 1971
- The NSA History Report of 1981

The U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry record contains testimony by fourteen *Liberty* crew members and five subject matter experts; exhibits of attack damage photographs, various messages and memorandums; and findings of fact. The testimony record reveals “a shallow investigation, plagued by myriad disagreements between the captain and his crew.”<sup>[60]</sup> As to culpability, “It was not the responsibility of the court to rule on the culpability of the attackers, and no evidence was heard from the attacking nation”, the court concluded that “available evidence combines to indicate ... (that the attack was) a case of mistaken identity.” Additionally, the Court found that “heroism displayed by the Commanding Officer, officers and men of the *Liberty* was exceptional.”

The Joint Chief of Staff’s Report contains findings of fact related only to communication system failures associated



with the *Liberty* attack. It was not concerned with matters of culpability, nor does it contain statements thereof.

The CIA Memoranda consist of two documents: one dated June 13, 1967, and the other dated June 21, 1967. The June 13 memorandum is an “account of circumstances of the attack ... compiled from all available sources.” The June 21 memorandum is a point-by-point analysis of Israeli inquiry findings of fact. It concludes: “The attack was not made in malice toward the U.S. and was by mistake, but the failure of the IDF Headquarters and the attacking aircraft to identify the *Liberty* and the subsequent attack by torpedo boats were both incongruous and indicative of gross negligence.”

The **Clark Clifford Report** consists of a review of “all available information on the subject” and “deals with the question of Israeli culpability”, according to its transmittal memorandum. The report concludes: “The unprovoked attack on the *Liberty* constitutes a flagrant act of gross negligence for which the Israeli Government should be held completely responsible, and the Israeli military personnel involved should be punished.”

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Testimony contains, as an aside matter during hearings concerning a foreign aid authorization bill, questions and statements from several senators and responses from then **Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara**, about the *Liberty* attack. For the most part, the senators were dismayed about the attack, as expressed by Senator **Bourke B. Hickenlooper**: “From what I have read I can’t tolerate for one minute that this [attack] was an accident.” Also, there was concern about obtaining more information about the attack, as expressed by Committee chairman **J. William Fulbright**: “We asked for [the attack investigation report] about two weeks ago and have not received it yet from Secretary Rusk. ... By the time we get to it we will be on some other subject.” Secretary McNamara promised fast delivery of the investigation report (“... you will have it in four hours.”), and concluded his remarks by saying: “I simply want to emphasize that the investigative report does not show any evidence of a conscious intent to attack a U.S. vessel.”<sup>[61]</sup>

The **House Armed Services Committee** investigation report is titled, “Review of Department of Defense Worldwide Communications”. It was not an investigation focused on the *Liberty* attack; although, the committee’s report contains a section that describes communications flow involved with the *Liberty* incident.

The NSA History Report is, as its name connotes, a historical report that cited the U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry record, various military and government messages and memorandum, and personal interviews for its content. The report ends with a section entitled, “Unanswered Questions”, and provides no conclusion regarding culpability.

The *Liberty* Veterans Association (composed of veterans from the ship) states that U.S. congressional inves-

tigations and other U.S. investigations were not actually investigations into the attack, but rather reports using evidence only from the U.S. Navy Court of Inquiry, or investigations unrelated to culpability that involved issues such as communications. In their view, the U.S. Navy Court of Inquiry is the only actual investigation on the incident to date. They say it was hastily conducted, in only 10 days, even though the court’s president, **Rear Admiral Isaac Kidd**, said that it would take six months to conduct properly. The inquiry’s **terms of reference** were limited to whether any shortcomings on the part of the *Liberty*’s crew had contributed to the injuries and deaths that resulted from the attack.<sup>[62]</sup> According to the Navy Court of Inquiry’s record of proceedings, four days were spent hearing testimony: two days for fourteen survivors of the attack and several U.S. Navy expert witnesses, and two partial days for two expert U.S. Navy witnesses. No testimony was heard from Israeli personnel involved.

The **National Archives** in College Park, Maryland includes in its files on casualties from the *Liberty* copies of the original telegrams the Navy sent out to family members. The telegrams called the attack accidental. The telegrams were sent out June 9, the day before the Navy Court of Inquiry convened.

### 3.2 Israeli government investigations

Two subsequent Israeli inquiry reports and an historical report concluded the attack was conducted because *Liberty* was confused with an Egyptian vessel and because of failures in communications between Israel and the U.S. The three Israeli reports were:

- Fact Finding Inquiry by Colonel Ram Ron (“Ram Ron Report”—June 1967)<sup>[63]</sup>
- Preliminary Inquiry (Hearing) by Examining Judge **Yeshayahu Yerushalmi** (“Yerushalmi Report”—July 1967)<sup>[64]</sup> (Adjudication of IDF negligence complaints.)
- Historical Report “The *Liberty* Incident”—IDF History Department Report (1982)<sup>[65]</sup>

In the historical report, it was acknowledged that IDF naval headquarters knew at least three hours before the attack that the ship was “an electromagnetic audio-surveillance ship of the U.S. Navy” but concluded that this information had simply “gotten lost, never passed along to the ground controllers who directed the air attack nor to the crews of the three Israeli torpedo boats.”

The Israeli government said that three crucial errors were made: the refreshing of the status board (removing the ship’s classification as American, so that the later shift did not see it identified), the erroneous identification of the ship as an Egyptian vessel, and the lack of notification from the returning aircraft informing Israeli headquarters

of markings on the front of the hull (markings that would not be found on an Egyptian ship). As a common root of these problems, Israel blamed the combination of alarm and fatigue experienced by the Israeli forces at that point of the war when pilots were severely overworked.

After conducting his own fact-finding inquiry and reviewing evidence, Judge Yerushalmi's decision was: "I have not discovered any deviation from the standard of reasonable conduct which would justify committal of anyone for trial." In other words, he found no negligence by any IDF member associated with the attack.

## 4 Ongoing controversy and unresolved questions

Some intelligence and military officials dispute Israel's explanation.<sup>[66]</sup>

**Dean Rusk**, U.S. Secretary of State at the time of the incident, wrote:

I was never satisfied with the Israeli explanation. Their sustained attack to disable and sink *Liberty* precluded an assault by accident or some trigger-happy local commander. Through diplomatic channels we refused to accept their explanations. I didn't believe them then, and I don't believe them to this day. The attack was outrageous.<sup>[67]</sup>

Retired naval Lieutenant Commander **James Ennes**, a junior officer (and off-going Officer of the Deck) on *Liberty*'s bridge at the time of the attack, authored a book titled *Assault on the Liberty* describing the incident during the Six Day War in June 1967 and saying, among other things, that the attack was deliberate.<sup>[68]</sup> Ennes and **Joe Meadors**, also survivors of the attack, run a website about the incident.<sup>[69]</sup> Meadors states that the classification of the attack as deliberate is the official policy of the **USS Liberty Veterans Association**,<sup>[70]</sup> to which survivors and other former crew members belong. Other survivors run several additional websites. Citing Ennes's book, **Lencowski** notes: *Liberty*'s personnel received firm orders not to say anything to anybody about the attack, and the naval inquiry was conducted in such a way as to earn it the name of "coverup".<sup>[55]</sup>

In 2002, Captain **Ward Boston**, JAGC, U.S. Navy, senior counsel for the Court of Inquiry, said that the Court of Inquiry's findings were intended to cover up what was a deliberate attack by Israel on a ship that the Israelis knew to be American. In 2004, in response to the publication of **A. Jay Cristol**'s book *The Liberty Incident*, which Boston said was an "insidious attempt to whitewash the facts", Boston prepared and signed an affidavit in which he said that Admiral Kidd had told him that the government ordered Kidd to falsely report that the attack was a mistake,

and that Boston and Kidd both believed the attack was deliberate.<sup>[71]</sup> On the issue Boston wrote, in part:

The evidence was clear. Both Admiral Kidd and I believed with certainty that this attack, which killed 34 American sailors and injured 172 others, was a deliberate effort to sink an American ship and murder its entire crew. Each evening, after hearing testimony all day, we often spoke our private thoughts concerning what we had seen and heard. I recall Admiral Kidd repeatedly referring to the Israeli forces responsible for the attack as 'murderous bastards.' It was our shared belief, based on the documentary evidence and testimony we received first hand, that the Israeli attack was planned and deliberate, and could not possibly have been an accident.

Cristol wrote about Boston's professional qualifications and integrity, on page 149 of his book:

Boston brought two special assets in addition to his skill as a Navy lawyer. He had been a naval aviator in World War II and therefore had insight beyond that of one qualified only in the law. Also, Kidd knew him as a man of integrity. On an earlier matter Boston had been willing to bump heads with Kidd when Boston felt it was more important to do the right thing than to curry favor with the senior who would write his fitness report.

Cristol believes that Boston is not telling the truth about Kidd's views and any pressure from the U.S. government.<sup>[72]</sup> Cristol, who also served as an officer of the U.S. Navy's Judge Advocate General, suggests that Boston was responsible in part for the original conclusions of the Court of Inquiry and, that by later declaring that they were false, Boston has admitted to "lying under oath." Cristol also notes that Boston's statements about pressure on Kidd were hearsay, and that Kidd was not alive to confirm or deny them. He also notes that Boston did not maintain, prior to his affidavit and comments related to it, that Kidd spoke of such instructions to Boston or to others. Finally, Cristol provides a handwritten 1991 letter from Admiral Kidd<sup>[73]</sup> that, according to Cristol, "suggest that Ward Boston has either a faulty memory or a vivid imagination".

The **Anti-Defamation League** supports Cristol's opinion:

... according to his own account, Boston's evidence of a cover-up derives not from his own part in the investigation but solely on alleged conversations with Admiral Kidd, who purportedly told him he was forced to find that the attack was unintentional. Kidd died in 1999



and there is no way to verify Boston's statements. However, Cristol argues that the 'documentary record' strongly indicated that Kidd 'supported the validity of the findings of the Court of Inquiry to his dying day.'<sup>[74]</sup>

According to James Ennes, however, Admiral Kidd urged Ennes and his group to keep pressing for an open congressional probe.<sup>[75]</sup>

The following arguments, found in official reports or other sources, were published to support that the attack was due to mistaken identity:

- Accidents do occur in wartime. According to journalist **Ze'ev Schiff**, the day before the attack on the *Liberty*, Israeli aircraft had bombed an Israeli armored column south of the West Bank town of **Jenin**, demonstrating such mistakes do happen.<sup>[76]</sup>
- The incident took place during the **Six Day War** when Israel was engaged in battles with two Arab countries and preparing to attack a third, creating an environment where mistakes and confusion were prevalent. For example, at 11:45, a few hours before the attack, there was a large explosion on the shores of El-Arish followed by black smoke, probably caused by the destruction of an ammunition dump by retreating Egyptian forces. The Israeli army thought the area was being bombarded, and that an unidentified ship offshore was responsible. (According to U.S. sources, *Liberty* was 14 nmi (16 mi; 26 km) from those shores at the time of the explosion.)
- As the torpedo boats rapidly approached, *Liberty* opened fire on them. This was after the aerial attacks. At the inquiry, Commander McGonagle expressed that the torpedo boats appeared to be approaching in an attack formation. Thus, he sent a person to the forward machine gun to fire at them. After several shots were fired, McGonagle ordered cease fire. Then a machine gun on 03 level sounded like it was firing, but nobody was seen at the gun. McGonagle said that he felt sure the torpedo boat captains believed they were under fire from the *Liberty*. Ensign Lucas, the ship's gunnery officer who left the bridge shortly after the beginning of the air attack and then returned during the torpedo boat attack, testified that he gave permission for manned firing of the 03 level machine gun after the torpedo boats began firing at *Liberty*. Then, later when the gun was unmanned, heat from a nearby fire apparently caused machine gun rounds at the 03 level gun to explode.<sup>[20]</sup>
- Admiral Shlomo Erell, former head of the Israeli Navy in 1967, states that no successful argument of benefit has been presented for Israel purposely attacking an American warship, especially consider-

ing the high cost of predictable complications that would follow after attacking a powerful ally, and the fact that Israel notified the American embassy immediately after the attack.<sup>[77]</sup>



*Amidships starboard hull and superstructure attack damage*

Several books and the BBC documentary *USS Liberty: Dead in the Water* argued that *Liberty* was attacked in order to prevent the U.S. from knowing about the forthcoming attack in the **Golan Heights**, which would violate a cease-fire to which Israel's government had agreed.<sup>[78]</sup> However, Syria did not accept the cease fire until 9 June, after the attack on *Liberty*.<sup>[79]</sup> Russian author Joseph Daichman, in his book *History of the Mossad*, states Israel was justified in attacking the *Liberty*.<sup>[80]</sup> Israel knew that American radio signals were intercepted by the Soviet Union and that the Soviets would certainly inform Egypt of the fact that, by moving troops to the Golan Heights, Israel had left the Egyptian border undefended.<sup>[81]</sup>

Lenczowski notes that while the Israeli decision to "attack and destroy" the ship "may appear puzzling", the explanation seems to be found in *Liberty*'s nature and its task to monitor communications on both sides in the war zone. He writes, "Israel clearly did not want the U.S. government to know too much about its dispositions for attacking Syria, initially planned for 8 June, but postponed for 24 hours. It should be pointed out that the attack on *Liberty* occurred on 8 June, whereas on 9 June at 3 am, Syria announced its acceptance of the cease-fire. Despite this, at 7 am, that is, four hours later, Israel's minister of de-

fense, **Moshe Dayan**, “gave the order to go into action against Syria.”<sup>[82]</sup> He further writes that timely knowledge of this decision and preparatory moves toward it “might have frustrated Israeli designs for the conquest of Syria’s Golan Heights” and, in the sense of Ennes’s accusations, provides “a plausible thesis that Israel deliberately decided to incapacitate the signals-collecting American ship and leave no one alive to tell the story of the attack.”<sup>[83]</sup>

U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Barbour, had reported on the day of the *Liberty* attack that he “would not be surprised” by an Israeli attack on Syria, and the IDF Intelligence chief told a White House aide then in Israel that “there still remained the Syria problem and perhaps it would be necessary to give Syria a blow.”<sup>[84]</sup>

The 1981 book *Weapons* by Russell Warren Howe says that *Liberty* was accompanied by the Polaris ballistic missile-armed *Lafayette*-class submarine *USS Andrew Jackson*, which filmed the entire episode through its periscope but was unable to provide assistance. According to Howe: “Two hundred feet below the ship, on a parallel course, was its ‘shadow’—the Polaris strategic submarine *Andrew Jackson*, whose job was to take out all the Israeli long-range missile sites in the Negev if Tel Aviv decided to attack Cairo, Damascus or Baghdad. This was in order that Moscow would not have to perform this task itself and thus trigger World War Three.”<sup>[85]</sup>

**James Bamford**, a former **ABC News** producer, in his 2001 book *Body of Secrets*,<sup>[86]</sup> says Israel deliberately attacked *Liberty* to prevent the discovery of what he described as war crimes, including the killing of Egyptian prisoners of war by the IDF that he alleges was taking place around the same time in the nearby town of **El-Arish**.<sup>[87]</sup> However according to **CAMERA** his claim that 400 were executed has been cast into doubt since reporters present in the town claimed that there had in fact been a large battle and this was the main cause of casualties.<sup>[88]</sup> Bamford also claimed that eyewitness **Gabi Bron** had claimed he saw 150 people executed by Israeli troops at **El-Arish**.<sup>[86]</sup> However **Gabi Bron** claimed to have only seen 5 people executed by Israeli troops.<sup>[89][90]</sup>

The press release for the BBC documentary film *Dead in the Water* states that new recorded and other evidence suggests the attack was a “daring ploy by Israel to fake an Egyptian attack” to give America a reason to enter the war against Egypt. Convinced that the attack was real, President of the United States **Lyndon B. Johnson** launched allegedly nuclear-armed aircraft targeted against Cairo from a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean. The aircraft were recalled only just in time, when it was clear the *Liberty* had not sunk and that Israel had carried out the attack. An information source for the aircraft being nuclear-armed, **James Ennes**, later stated:

Although America could not send conventionally armed jets, reports still come in that four jet bombers were catapulted from the car-

rier America with nuclear bombs aboard. Even today there is no official confirmation of that launch and much high-level denial. A nuclear launch has been strongly denied by Secretary **McNamara**, Admiral **Martin** (now deceased), Admiral **Geis** (deceased), Admiral **Moorer**, and America’s skipper, Admiral **David Engen** (deceased) and others. Yet eyewitness reports persist. Clearly no such launch could have been intended for offensive purposes. Surely nuclear weapons would not have been used in defense of the *USS Liberty*.

It is clear that I was mistaken about the aircraft involved, as F4s do not carry nuclear weapons. Others tell me that the aircraft that were launched carried **Bullpup** missiles, which might easily be mistaken for nuclear bombs. And we learned much later that the *USS America* was involved in a nuclear weapons loading drill at the very time the ship learned of the attack on the *Liberty* and that this drill is one factor that delayed America’s response to our call for help. It is also possible that those were the weapons seen by our sources.

Also confusing this issue is an oral history report from the American Embassy in Cairo, now in the **LBJ Library**, which notes that the Embassy received an urgent message from Washington warning that Cairo was about to be bombed by US forces, presumably in mistaken retaliation for the *USS Liberty* attack. That strange message was never explained or cancelled.<sup>[91]</sup>

The video also provides hearsay evidence of a covert alliance of U.S. and Israel intelligence agencies.<sup>[92]</sup>

Admiral **Thomas H. Moorer**, former **Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff** and a critic of the official United States Government version of events, chaired a non-governmental investigation into the attack on the *USS Liberty* in 2003. The committee, which included former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia **James E. Akins**, held Israel to be culpable and suggested several theories for Israel’s possible motives, including the desire to blame Egypt and bring the U.S. into the Six Day War.<sup>[93]</sup>

## 5 NSA tapes and recent developments

Within an hour of learning that the *Liberty* had been torpedoed, the director of NSA, **LTG Marshall S. Carter**, sent a message to all intercept sites requesting a special search of all communications that might reflect the attack or reaction. No communications were available. However, one of the airborne platforms, a U.S. Navy **EC-121** aircraft that flew near the attacks from 2:30 pm to 3:27

pm, Sinai time (1230 to 1327 Z), had collected voice conversations between two Israeli helicopter pilots and the control tower at Hatzor Airfield following the attack on the *Liberty*.<sup>[94]</sup>

On 2 July 2003, the National Security Agency released copies of the recordings made by the EC-121 and the resultant translations and summaries.<sup>[95]</sup> These revelations were elicited as part of a **Freedom of Information Act** lawsuit by Florida bankruptcy judge and retired naval aviator **Jay Cristol**. Two linguists who were aboard the EC-121 when the recordings were made, however, said separately that at least two additional tapes were made that have been excluded from the NSA releases up to and including a 8 June 2007, release.<sup>[7]</sup>

English transcripts of the released tapes indicate that Israel still spoke of hitting an Egyptian supply ship even after the attack had stopped.<sup>[96][97]</sup> After the attack, the rescue helicopters are heard relaying several urgent requests that the rescuers ask the first survivor pulled out of the water what his nationality is, and discussing whether the survivors from the attacked ship will speak Arabic.<sup>[98]</sup>

A summary report of the NSA-translated tapes<sup>[99]</sup> indicates that at 1234Z Hatzor air control began directing two Israeli Air Force helicopters to an Egyptian warship, to rescue its crew: "This ship has now been identified as Egyptian." The helicopters arrived near the ship at about 1303Z: "I see a big vessel, near it are three small vessels..." At 1308Z, Hatzor air control indicated concern about the nationality of the ship's crew: "The first matter to clarify is to find out what their nationality is." At 1310Z, one of the helicopter pilots asked the nearby torpedo boats' Division Commander about the meaning of the ship's hull number: "GTR5 is written on it. Does this mean something?" The response was: "Negative, it doesn't mean anything." At 1312Z, one of the helicopter pilots was asked by air control: "Did you clearly identify an American flag?" No answer appears in the transcript, but the air controller then says: "We request that you make another pass and check once more if this is really an American flag." Again, no response appears in the transcript. At about 1314Z, the helicopters were directed to return home.

The NSA reported that there had been no radio intercepts of the attack made by the *Liberty* herself, nor had there been any radio intercepts made by the U.S. submarine **USS *Amberjack***.

On 10 October 2003, *The Jerusalem Post* ran an interview with **Yiftah Spector**, one of the pilots who participated in the attack,<sup>[100]</sup> and thought to be the lead pilot of the first wave of aircraft. Spector said the ship was assumed to be Egyptian, stating that: "I circled it twice and it did not fire on me. My assumption was that it was likely to open fire at me and nevertheless I slowed down and I looked and there was positively no flag." The interview also contains the transcripts of the Israeli communications about the *Liberty*. The journalist who transcribed the tapes for that

article, **Arieh O'Sullivan**, later confirmed that "the Israeli Air Force tapes he listened to contained blank spaces."<sup>[7]</sup>

The *Liberty*'s survivors contradict Spector. According to subsequently declassified NSA documents: "Every official interview of numerous *Liberty* crewmen gave consistent evidence that indeed the *Liberty* was flying an American flag—and, further, the weather conditions were ideal to ensure its easy observance and identification."<sup>[101]</sup>

On 8 June 2005, the USS *Liberty* Veterans Association filed a "Report of War Crimes Committed Against the U.S. Military, June 8, 1967" with the Department of Defense (DoD). They say **Department of Defense Directive 2311.01E** requires the Department of Defense to conduct a thorough investigation of the allegations contained in their report. DoD has responded that a new investigation will not be conducted since a Navy Court of Inquiry already investigated the facts and circumstances surrounding the attack.

As of 2006, the **National Security Agency (NSA)** has yet to declassify "boxes and boxes" of *Liberty* documents. Numerous requests under both declassification directives and the Freedom of Information Act are pending in various agencies including the NSA, **Central Intelligence Agency**, and **Defense Intelligence Agency**. "On 8 June 2007, the National Security Agency released hundreds of additional declassified documents on the Israeli attack on the USS *Liberty*, a communications interception vessel, on 8 June 1967."<sup>[102]</sup>

On 2 October 2007, *The Chicago Tribune* published a special report<sup>[7]</sup> into the attack, containing numerous previously unreported quotes from former military personnel with first-hand knowledge of the incident. Many of these quotes directly contradict the U.S. National Security Agency's position that it never intercepted the communications of the attacking Israeli pilots, saying that not only did transcripts of those communications exist, but also that it showed the Israelis knew they were attacking an American naval vessel.

Two diplomatic cables written by **Avraham Harman**, Israel's ambassador in Washington, to **Abba Eban** Israel's minister of foreign affairs, have been declassified by Israel and obtained from the **Israel State Archive**. The first cable, sent five days after the attack, informs Eban that a U.S. informant told him (Harman) that there was "clear proof that from a certain stage the pilot discovered the identity of the ship and continued the attack anyway."<sup>[103]</sup> The second cable, sent three days later, added that the White House is "very angry" because "the Americans probably have findings showing that our pilots indeed knew that the ship was American."<sup>[7]</sup>

Documents of the Israeli General Staff meetings, declassified in October 2008, show no discussion of a planned attack on an American ship.<sup>[104]</sup>

On 30 October 2014, **Al Jazeera English** broadcast a documentary film containing recent first-hand accounts by



several survivors of the incident.<sup>[105]</sup>

## 6 Details in dispute



The “Second Ensign” flown during the attack. Israel Defense Forces’ investigative reports say their pilots and torpedo boat commander saw no flags during the attack

Many of the events surrounding the attack are the subject of controversy:

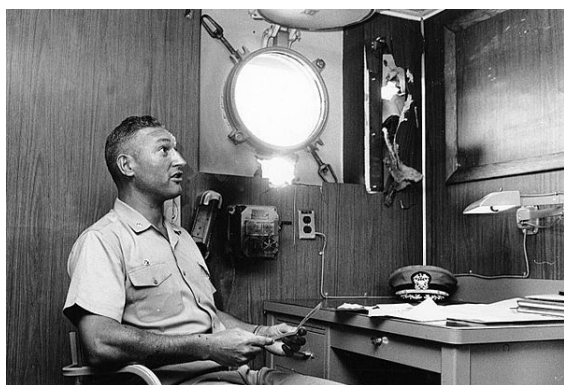
- *Visibility of American flag:* The official Israeli reports say that the reconnaissance and fighter aircraft pilots, and the torpedo boat captains did not see any flag on *Liberty*. Official American reports say that the *Liberty* was flying her American flag before, during and after the attack; the only exception being a brief period in which one flag had been shot down and then replaced with a larger flag that measured approximately 13 ft (4.0 m) long. U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry finding number 2 states: “The calm conditions and slow speed of the ship may well have made the American flag difficult to identify.” And finding number 28 states: “Flat, calm conditions and the slow five knot patrol speed of LIBERTY in forenoon when she was being looked over initially may well have produced insufficient wind for steaming colors enough to be seen by pilots.”<sup>[106]</sup> The NSA History Report (page 41) states: “... every official interview of numerous Liberty crewmen gave consistent evidence that indeed the Liberty was flying an American flag—and, further, the weather

conditions were ideal to ensure its easy observance and identification.”

- *U.S. crewmen’s perceptions of intent:* Surviving crewmembers of the *Liberty* say that Israel’s attack on the ship was “deliberate” and with full knowledge that the vessel was American. Israeli investigation and history reports agree that the attack was deliberate—but against what they believed was an Egyptian enemy vessel, not an American neutral vessel.
- *Distinctiveness of USS Liberty’s appearance:* One major dispute is whether the *Liberty* would have been immediately recognized as a different ship from the Egyptian ship *El Quseir*. Admiral Tom Moorer stated that the *Liberty* was the most identifiable ship in the U.S. Navy and in an interview with the *Washington Post* stated: “To suggest that they [the IDF] couldn’t identify the ship is ... ridiculous. Anybody who could not identify the *Liberty* could not tell the difference between the White House and the Washington Monument.” Israel states in its inquiry and history reports that the identification as the *El Quseir* was made by the torpedo boats while the *Liberty* was enveloped in smoke and was based on “The Red Book”, a guide to Arab fleets that did not include U.S. vessels.<sup>(Web site with images of both ships)</sup>
- *Identification markings:* *Liberty* bore an eight-foot-high “5” and a four-foot-high “GTR” along either bow, clearly indicating her hull (or “pendant”) number (AGTR-5), and had 18-inch (460 mm)-high letters spelling the vessel’s name across the *stern*. These markings were not cursive *Arabic script* but in the *Latin alphabet*. Israeli pilots say initially they were primarily concerned with ensuring the ship was a non-Israeli warship and that they ended the air attack when they noticed the Latin alphabet markings.<sup>[107]</sup>
- *Ship’s identification known during attack:* A James Bamford book,<sup>[108]</sup> published in 2001, said that secret NSA intercepts recorded by an American EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft indicate that Israeli pilots had full knowledge they were attacking a U.S. vessel.<sup>[109]</sup> This 2001 proposition has played a significant role in the ongoing controversies about the incident, and continues to be widely cited. The tapes were later released by the National Security Agency in 2003 as a result of a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit brought by Judge and author A. Jay Cristol. However, instead of the EC-121 attack tapes requested by the FOIA request, the tapes released contained post-attack communications of Israeli helicopter pilots, their ground controller, and someone on one of the torpedo boats. The helicopters were sent to the attack site to provide assistance after the

air attack. The helicopter pilots noticed an American flag flying from the ship almost immediately upon their arrival at the attack site<sup>[110]</sup> and informed their controller. See [other sources](#) for a link to the NSA website with complete transcripts. The NSA Website denies that there are any U.S. recordings of the attack itself; although, this is disputed by several intelligence specialists who say they read the original transcripts.

- *Effort for identification:* The American crew says the attacking aircraft did not make identification runs over *Liberty*, but rather began to strafe immediately. Israel says several identification passes were made. The Naval Court of Enquiry, based on the Israeli timeline of events, found “One may infer from the fact that within a period of approximately 15 minutes, the request was transmitted (for aircraft to be dispatched), received, a command decision made, aircraft dispatched, and the attack launched, that no significant time was expended in an effort to identify the ship from the air before the attack was launched.”<sup>[111]</sup>
- *Speed of the vessel:* According to Israeli accounts, the torpedo boat made (admittedly erroneous) measurements that indicated the ship was steaming at 30 kn (35 mph; 56 km/h). Israeli naval doctrine at the time required that a ship traveling at that speed must be presumed to be a warship. A second boat calculated *Liberty*'s speed to be 28 kn (32 mph; 52 km/h). The maximum sustained speed of *Liberty* was only 17.5 kn (20.1 mph; 32.4 km/h), 21 kn (24 mph; 39 km/h) being attainable by overriding the engine governors. According to *Body of Secrets*, by James Bamford, *Liberty* crewmen (including the Officer-of-the-Deck) and the Court of Enquiry findings the ship was steaming at 5 kn (5.8 mph; 9.3 km/h) at the time of the attack.



Commander W.L. McGonagle in his damaged cabin after the attack

- *Motive:* James Bamford, among others, says one possible motive was to prevent the United States

from eavesdropping on Israeli military activities and monitoring the events taking place in nearby Gaza.<sup>[109]</sup> In a study of the incident concluding that there was insufficient evidence to support either accidental or deliberate attack, Colonel Peyton E. Smith wrote of the possibility that “The attack was most likely deliberate for reasons far too sensitive to be disclosed by the US (or) Israeli government and that the truth may never be known”.<sup>[112]</sup> Author and former crew member James M. Ennes theorized, in the epilogue of his book *Assault on the Liberty*, that the motive was to prevent the ship’s crew from monitoring radio traffic that might reveal Israel being the aggressor in its impending invasion of Syria, which the White House opposed. According to the [Anti Defamation League](#) “the argument that Israel knowingly attacked an American ship has always lacked a convincing motive”.<sup>[113]</sup>

- *Israeli aircraft markings:* The USS *Liberty* Veterans Association says that the attacking Israeli aircraft were not marked,<sup>[70]</sup> but a crewmember recalls watching a Jewish officer cry on seeing the blue Star of David on their fuselages.<sup>[7]</sup> The torpedo boats that attacked *Liberty* did fly the flag of Israel.<sup>[45]</sup>
- *Jamming:* During U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry testimony, Wayne L. Smith, Radioman Chief, testified: “... We did have [radio frequency] jamming in my estimation. I was unable to determine this exactly, but every time it seems when an attack was made on us, or a strafing run, it was preceded by, anywhere from 25 to 30 seconds, carrier on our HICOM circuit, and I had ascertained to check this by calling the transmitter room and they said that they had not keyed the transmitter. This prevailed during the attack and quite a bit after the attack, intermittently.” In a U.S. Navy message dated 11 July 1967, sent by Rear Admiral Kidd (senior member of Naval Court of Inquiry) via the Naval Communications Unit, Naples, Italy to Commander in Chief U.S. Navy Europe and Chief Naval Operations, Rear Admiral Kidd stated, in part: “*Liberty* reported apparent discriminate jamming on certain CW and voice circuits just before and during each aircraft’s individual attack. Effect was to scare mischief out of those below who heard it start, because they knew a rocket or bomb would soon follow.” None of the Israeli Defense Forces’ investigations or reports confirm or deny radio frequency jamming was performed during or following the attack.
- *Visual communications:* Joe Meadors, the signalman on bridge, states that “Immediately prior to the torpedo attack, he was on the Signal Bridge repeatedly sending ‘USS *Liberty* U.S. Navy Ship’ by flashing light to the torpedo boats.” The Israeli boats say they sent the signal “AA” (general call) for which the formal reply would be TTTT later followed by

both vessels sending identification codes. Commander Moshe Oren says he thought *Liberty* signaled AA in reply, which was the same reply he received from the Egyptian destroyer *Ibrahim el Awal* eleven years earlier. Oren then consulted “The Red Book” (identification of Arabian navies) noting that the only match for the “old tub” with one funnel and two masts was the *El Quseir*. Meadors says he never sent “AA”.<sup>[114]</sup>

- *Israeli ships' actions after the torpedo hit:* Officers and men of *Liberty* say that after the torpedo attack and the abandon ship order, motor torpedo boats strafed the ship's topside with automatic gunfire preventing men from escaping from below, and either machine-gunned or confiscated the empty life rafts that had been set afloat.<sup>[115][116]</sup> The IDF says that *Liberty* was not fired upon after the torpedo attack and that a rescue raft was fished from the water while searching for survivors.<sup>[117]</sup>
- *Israeli offers of help:* The *Liberty*'s captain, several of the *Liberty*'s crewmen and the Israelis stated that help was offered, but at different times. The *Liberty*'s Deck Log, signed by the captain, has an entry at 15:03 stating: “One MTB returned to the ship and signalled, 'Do you need help.' Commanding officer directed that 'Negative' be sent in reply.” The captain testified before the Court of Inquiry, on page 40 of recorded testimony: “One of the boats signaled by flashing light, in English, 'do you require assistance?' We had no means to communicate with the boat by light but hoisted code lima india. The signal intended to convey the fact that the ship was maneuvering with difficulty and that they should keep clear.”. Ensign David G. Lucas, First Lieutenant and Gunnery Officer testified in the Court of Inquiry on page 17 that: “another patrol craft approached us from the starboard side and did manage to get clear of the smoke. The signalman took the message, 'do you need help?'”. Harold Jessie Thompson, Chief Communications Technician testified in the court of inquiry on page 88 that: “When they were about 500 yards off, the torpedo boat turned astern and came up on the stern on the starboard side and flashed, 'do you need help?'”. James Ennes, in his book about the attack, on pages 102 and 103, acknowledges the Israelis offered help, says it occurred at 16:30, and the offer was rejected. The Israel Defense Forces's History Report about the attack on page 19, and the Ram Ron report on page 9 both say that help was offered at 16:40 and the offer was rejected.
- *U.S. rescue attempts:* At least two rescue attempts were launched from U.S. aircraft carriers nearby but were recalled, according to the *Liberty*'s senior Naval Security Group officer, Lieutenant Commander David Lewis. Lewis made an audio recording and later wrote about a meeting 6th Fleet Rear Admiral Lawrence Geis requested in his cabins: “He

told me that since I was the senior *Liberty* survivor on board he wanted to tell me in confidence what had actually transpired. He told me that upon receipt of our SOS, aircraft were launched to come to our assistance and then Washington was notified. He said that the Secretary of Defense (Robert McNamara) had ordered that the aircraft be returned to the carrier, which was done. RADM Geis then said that he speculated that Washington may have suspected that the aircraft carried nuclear weapons so he put together another flight of conventional aircraft that had no capability of carrying nuclear weapons. These he launched to assist us and again notified Washington of his actions. Again McNamara ordered the aircraft recalled. He requested confirmation of the order being unable to believe that Washington would let us sink. This time President Johnson ordered the recall with the comment that he did not care if every man drowned and the ship sank, but that he would not embarrass his allies. This is, to the best of my ability, what I recall transpiring 30 years ago.”

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- [6] <http://books.google.com/books?id=5a1kAgAAQBAJ&pg=PT252&dq=israel+apology+for+liberty+attack&hl=en&sa=X&ei=66jXU5DpFsiNyATS9YKwDw&ved=0CBwQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=israel%20apology%20for%20liberty%20attack&f=false>
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- would be sunk, Rabin advised; the United States should either acknowledge its ships in the area or remove them. The U.S. had also rejected Israel's request for a formal naval liaison. On 31 May, Avraham Harman, Israel's ambassador to Washington, had warned Under Secretary of State Eugene V. Rostow that if war breaks out, 'we would have no telephone number to call, no code for plane recognition, and no way to get in touch with the U.S. Sixth Fleet.'" Oren, Michael B. *The USS Liberty: Case Closed*, Azure, Spring 5760 / 2000, No. 9.
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- [39] Gerhard & Millington 1981, p. 25,26
- [40] Scott 2009, p. 39
- [41] Gerhard & Millington 1981, p. 28
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## 8 Further reading

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- *The Puzzle Palace*, by James Bamford, Penguin Books, 1982, has a detailed description of the Israeli attack on the SIGINT ship USS *Liberty*, and the events leading up to it, on pages 279–293.
- *Body of Secrets*, by James Bamford, devotes a detailed chapter to the incident, and concludes it was deliberate. Doubleday, 2001 (ISBN 0-09-942774-5)
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- John Borne, *The USS Liberty, Dissenting History vs. Official History*
- Thomas, Baylis (1999). *How Israel Was Won: A Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books. ISBN 0-7391-0064-5. In Chapter 15 on "The Six Day War and Its Consequences", dissects the sequence of events and concurrent attacks on Arab towns and explores the possibility that the attack on this U.S. spy ship was an intentional act to prevent U.S. monitoring of Israeli military actions, and that the intent was to kill all U.S. personnel on board before any kind of communications could be sent out.



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- Victor Thorn and John Glenn, “A Ship Without A Country: Eyewitness Accounts of the Attack on the USS *Liberty*”, American Free Press, Washington, DC, 2009, ISBN 978-0-9818086-6-6
- USS *Liberty*: Israel Did Not Intend to Bomb the Ship by A. Jay Cristol
- USS *Liberty* on [www.sixdaywar.org](http://www.sixdaywar.org)
- USS 'Liberty' hit was unintentional, says CIA
- USS *Liberty* attack tapes released by David Ensor, CNN

## 9 External links

### 9.1 U.S. government sites

- Itemised cost of repairs to the USS *Liberty* United States Department of the Navy September 1967
- Naval Historical Center, featuring photographs of the ship and crew, and the aftermath of the attack.
- National Security Agency’s Memorial Wall, including list of names inscribed on the wall.
- U.S. Navy JAG Corps investigations library contains links to record of proceedings for high-profile investigations, including the USS *Liberty*.
- Report of the JCS Fact-Finding Team; USS *Liberty* Incident/ 8 June 1967

### 9.2 Sources saying attack was a mistake

- The Lie that Won’t Die: the USS *Liberty* Attack Slander by Robert Weridine
- US tapes confirm Israel’s ‘67 attack on ‘Liberty’ was accidental
- The *Liberty* Incident, by A. Jay Cristol
- The USS *Liberty*: Case Closed Azure article by Michael Oren
- Michael Oren’s “Six Days of War.” Ballantine Books, 2003, p. 263–271
- Memos show *Liberty* attack was an error *Haaretz* article by Nathan Guttman
- Return of the USS *Liberty* Critique of Bamford’s “Body of Secrets” from Honest Reporting
- Bamford Bashes Israel: Conspiracy Theorist Claims Attack on USS *Liberty* Intentional from the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America
- The USS *Liberty* Attack from the Anti-Defamation League

### 9.3 Sources saying attack was deliberate

#### Survivors of the attack

- USS *Liberty* Veterans Association website
- USS *Liberty* Memorial, by survivor Jim Ennes. This site includes a wide variety of documents, photographs, statements by survivors, and responses to authors who argue that the attack was a mistake.
- Assault on *Liberty* Still Covered Up After 26 Years by Jim Ennes at Washington-Report
- BrasscheckTV Documentary Video: “Loss of Liberty—The Israeli Attack on the USS *Liberty*”
- 43 Years After Surviving Israeli Attack on USS *Liberty*, US Veteran Joe Meadors Seized by Israeli Forces on Gaza Aid Flotilla – video report by *Democracy Now!*

#### Sources other than survivors

- Chicago Tribune Article 2007
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- Captain Ward Boston (USN, Ret.), chief counsel to the Navy’s Board of Inquiry interviewed on Electric Politics 29 June 2007
- A Juridical Examination of the Israeli Attack on the USS *Liberty* by Lieutenant Commander Walter L. Jacobsen, JAGC, USN
- San Diego Union-Tribune: Lifting the “fog of war” by David Walsh
- U.S. Navy and Marine Casualties in Wars, Conflicts, Terrorist Acts, and other Hostile Acts
- Telegrams Cast Doubt on *Liberty* Report, Navy Times, 4 June 2007 by Bryant Jordan
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- **The Moorer Report.** Findings of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Israeli Attack on USS Liberty, the Recall of Military Rescue Support Aircraft while the Ship was Under Attack, and the Subsequent Cover-up by the United States Government
- War Crimes Committed against U.S. Personnel, 8 June 1967
- The Day Israel Attacked America – *Al Jazeera English* special programme 2014/10/30
- Groll, Elias *Spy vs. Spy, America and Israel* Edition, *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2015

Coordinates: 31°23'24"N 33°22'48"E / 31.3900°N 33.3800°E

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### 10.1 Text

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Scottmsg, Jules1236, Battless, Luna Santin, Carolmooredc, Marokwitz, F-451, Mschneblin, Myanw, Erxnmedia, DagosNavy, Thaimoss, Dimension31, ElComandanteChe, WaysAndMeans, Avaya1, Matthew Fennell, Magioladi-tis, Bongwarrior, Msgohan, Felix Stember, Rami R, Gabe1972, Aboutnu, Galifardeu, Nyttend, The Anomebot2, Nick Cooper, KCon-Wiki, Tsnm8888, Cgingold, Johnbibby, Lolololololol~enwiki, Terjen, Nielswik, Mtrolley, HuntClubJoe, MartinBot, TruthMeded, RP88, Keith D, Patar knight, Tinsola, Dinkytown, J.delanoy, Pharaoh of the Wizards, PalestineRemembered, JoDonHo, Billwilt, Benscripps, Problematique, Wisepiglet, Juliancolton, GS3, WLross, Davidships, Black Kite, German.Knowitall, TreasuryTag, Amikake3, Firstorm, Nilnertum, Majoreditor, FergusM1970, NeilMarsh, Ladrbill, Joybucket, Charbroil, J Costello, Igor Makhankov~enwiki, Sanfranman59, Inventis, UnitedStatesian, Frank G Anderson, SpecMode, Buffs, Doug, ErikWarmelink, JoeBaggett, Thunderbird2, JohnHistory, Bolo-holo, AdRock, GirasoleDE, 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